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ABSTRACT

Questionnaires were mailed in 1986 to school board presidents in small rural districts across the United States in order to identify the characteristics of successful rural school superintendents and the qualities that rural school boards look for when hiring a superintendent. There were 93 usable responses from 28 states. Analysis of the responses showed that the major challenges confronting superintendents in small rural districts were those of securing adequate school funding and improving school curriculum. Of somewhat lesser concern were securing and retaining teachers and improving student academic achievement. School consolidation did not appear to be a major issue. The school board presidents felt that superintendents should be able to communicate well and work well with staff, students, parents, and other community members. The ability to deal with school budgets, secure funds, and coordinate educational functions was also considered important. Honesty, integrity, good moral character, and a good personality were listed fairly frequently as important characteristics for a school superintendent. Interest and ability to live and work in a small community were also felt to contribute to a superintendent's effectiveness. (JHZ)

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RURAL SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS: A NATIONAL STUDY OF PERSPECTIVES OF SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENTS

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RURAL SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS: A NATIONAL STUDY OF PERSPECTIVES OF SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENTS

Background

Nearly two-thirds of the 15,600 public school districts in the United States are in areas designated as "rural" and roughly one-third of all public school students attend schools located in these areas. Although the basics of instruction are similar in urban, suburban, and rural schools, there are important demands of the rural instructional setting which are different. Teachers are generally more isolated from ongoing developments in their field and from other teachers with similar subject matter expertise. The cultural and geographical isolation common to many rural areas is thereby compounded by a sense of professional isolation. Secondary teachers typically teach a wider range of courses than their urban or suburban counterparts and, of necessity, take on added extracurricular assignments--usually without compensation. Elementary teachers are likely to teach two or more grade levels in the same classroom and do so without the assistance of teacher aides. Also, it is not unusual for rural teachers to be called upon to teach a class or subject in which they are not adequately trained and yet receive little, if any inservice support. Small towns and communities limit privacy, making teachers much more visible in the communities in which they live and work. Due to limited resources, rural educators are frequently required to use outdated and/or inadequate supplies in their teaching. Finally, salaries for rural teachers, on the average, are 20-25% lower than those received by urban and suburban teachers.

Problem Statement

The differences between teaching in a rural versus a nonrural setting pose unique challenges to those superintendents assigned to small, rural school districts. A successful rural school administrator must possess a variety of skills and abilities in order to appropriately meet the divergent needs of teachers, students, parents, and community members. Little information, however, is currently available in the literature which devotes itself to a study of traits or qualities possessed by successful rural school administrators. The problem was to find out--from the perspective of local school boards--(1) those traits which are most desirable in a superintendent assigned to manage a small rural district, and (2) characteristics which seem common to successful rural school superintendents.

Related Research

Previous research has documented the need for teacher preparation programs which identify specific skills common to successful rural school teachers (Barker, 1985; Gardener and Edington, 1982; Helge, 1982; Muse and Stonehocker, 1982). In a 1985 study, Barker and Beckner contacted college of education deans at public colleges and universities to determine the extent of teacher preparation programs for prospective rural educators. They learned that few programs were available that provided teacher training specifically for rural schools. However, one-half of the education deans surveyed agreed that teaching in a rural school was different from teaching in an urban or suburban school and needed a different preparation.

Even though numerous research studies have been conducted on the training of teachers for rural schools, there exists a dearth of information related to the preparation of administrators to manage these schools (Wilson, 1982). It is true that there are generic school administration/management skills applicable whether an administrator serves in a rural or nonrural setting. Generic works are valuable, yet, specific research is needed to identify skills and techniques unique to administrators assigned to manage small/rural school districts. Furthermore, although much useful information has resulted from the "effective schools movement", its research base is founded in elementary schools located in urban districts. To claim that the effective schools literature applies fully to rural schools is only an assumption without empirical support.

Objectives

The purpose of the study was to contact stratified samples of school board presidents in small rural school districts across the United States in order to (1) identify desirable traits of a successful rural school superintendent, and (2) qualities which rural school boards look for when hiring a prospective school superintendent.

Methodology

The samples used for this study consisted of 339 school board presidents from the 42 states having school districts with enrollments of 300 or smaller and a replication using 277 board presidents. A mailing list purchased from Market Data Retrieval Incorporated (1986) listed a population of 2,779 such districts in the United States.

Districts were chosen first to represent each of the 42 states regardless of the number of small districts. The second criterion was representation on the basis of the quantity of small districts in those states. A questionnaire (See Appendix A) was mailed to the attention of the school board president of each of the sample districts, the first run in mid-June and the second in early September, 1986. Responses were returned by 59 and 47 board presidents from 26 and 21 different states, respectively, return rates of 17.4 and 17.0 percent. Of these responses, 53 and 40, respectively, were received in time for processing and were within the size limits of the districts studied. Only 42 states have school districts with 300 or fewer students and only 32 have more than three such districts. Twenty-eight (28) of those 32 states were represented with usable data in these studies.

Findings

The average sizes of the respondents' districts were 168 and 155 students. The board presidents in each study typically were male businesspersons, farmers, or ranchers, and had been board members for eight years, half of which were spent in their current positions. The district superintendents were usually males who had held their positions, on the average, eight years. According to the school board presidents of both groups, the major challenges confronting superintendents were those of securing adequate school monies and improving school curriculums. The next concerns, again shared by both groups, were securing and retaining teachers, and student achievement in the schools. Interestingly, consolidation of the district with a neighboring district was not considered to be a major challenge by most respondents in either group.

The major strengths both groups of board presidents felt were possessed by the superintendents were interpersonal relations/communication, financial/organizational management, and good moral character/personality. The ability to communicate well with staff, teachers, students, parents, and other community members as well as to be able to work well with them was listed by nearly half of the respondents. Not too far behind interpersonal relations skills were fiscal and organizational talents. The ability to deal with school budgets, secure funds, and coordinate educational functions were also considered to be quite important. Having honesty, integrity, good moral character, and a good personality were listed fairly frequently as well.

A third to a half of the school board presidents felt that the district superintendents had no weaknesses. Of those who did, however, poor interpersonal relations was mentioned most frequently.

The school board presidents seemed to draw heavily upon their responses to the question regarding strengths of the present administrators in responding to the question of what characteristics distinguished effective rural school superintendents from ineffective ones. Again, ability to communicate and work cooperatively and effectively with others was on top, while financial and organizational management were not far behind. Interest and ability to live and work in a small community was also mentioned several times.

The school board presidents had the opportunity to agree or disagree with a number of statements concerning qualities of rural school superintendents. The strongest agreements from both study groups were with the statements that superintendents assigned to small, rural districts face challenges and problems which are different from superintendents assigned to large urban or suburban districts and that superintendents should be the leaders in encouraging involvement and activity in the schools.

On the other hand the board presidents disagreed most that it is difficult for a small district to attract and retain a qualified superintendent. They disagreed also, but to a lesser extent, that the superintendent should be held personally accountable for his or her school district's academic performance.

The school board presidents were asked to respond to certain traits for which they would look if they were to hire a new superintendent. The trait which both groups deemed most desirable was that the candidate enjoy living in a small community. Other important traits included having high moral and/or religious values, understanding the sociological implications of living in a small community, and being aware of current research practices and innovations in education.

Having extended family or relatives living in the area and being male were traits of least importance in the selection of a rural school superintendent. Being married and being opposed to district consolidation were also considered to be of lesser importance.

Conclusions

According to two samplings of school board presidents of small rural school districts across the nation, the major challenges confronting superintendents in those districts were those of securing adequate school funding and improving school curriculums. Of somewhat lesser concern were securing and retaining teachers, and enhancing student achievement in the schools. School consolidation did not appear to be a major issue.

The school board presidents felt that to address these concerns, superintendents needed to be able to communicate well with staff, teachers, students, parents, and other community members as well as to be able to work with them. The ability to deal with school budgets, secure funds, and coordinate educational functions were also considered to be quite important. Having honesty, integrity, good moral character, and a good personality were listed fairly frequently also. Interest and ability to live and work in a small community contributed, it was felt, to their effectiveness.

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Appendix A

Survey Instrument and Responses

RURAL SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT SURVEY

The information in this questionnaire is being collected in order to achieve a better understanding of the duties and responsibilities of superintendents assigned to our nation's small, rural school districts.

Please answer each question listed below. CIRCLE the appropriate answer or WRITE IN the answer(s) when requested.

SECTION 1: GENERAL INFORMATION

1. In what state is your school district located? (write in)
The study (1 or 2) in which the state is represented is indicated.

Alaska (1)	Indiana (1)	Nebraska (1,2)	Oregon (1,2)
Arizona (1)	Iowa (1,2)	Nevada (1)	South Dakota (1)
Arkansas (1,2)	Kansas (1,2)	New Jersey (1)	Texas (1,2)
California (1)	Maine (2)	New Mexico (1,2)	Vermont (1,2)
Colorado (2)	Minnesota (1,2)	New York (1,2)	Virginia (1)
Connecticut (1)	Mississippi (2)	North Dakota (1)	Washington (2)
Idaho (1,2)	Missouri (1,2)	Ohio (2)	Wisconsin (1,2)
Illinois (2)	Montana (1,2)	Oklahoma (1,2)	Wyoming (1)

2. What is the approximate student enrollment of your school district? (write in)

Study 1:	Range:	37-300	Average:	168
Study 2:	Range:	8-300	Average:	155

3. How many years have you been a school board president?

Study 1:	Range:	1-39	Average:	4.1
Study 2:	Range:	1-16	Average:	4.6

4. How many years have you served as a member of the school board?

Study 1:	Range:	1-39	Average:	8.3
Study 2:	Range:	1-17	Average:	8.0

5. What is your occupation?

	Study 1	Study 2
Businessperson	40%	33%
Farmer/Rancher	25%	46%
Logger/Forester	13%	0%
Maintenance/Laborer	6%	8%
Teacher	4%	0%
Homemaker	6%	5%
Retired	6%	8%

6. What is your sex? a) male b) female

Study 1:	81% Male	19% Female
Study 2:	75% Male	25% Female

SECTION 2: THE DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

1. ESTIMATE the number of years your present superintendent has served in his/her role as superintendent?

   Study 1: Range: 1-36 Average: 9.0
   Study 2: Range: 1-26 Average: 7.2

2. Sex of superintendent: a) male b) female

   Study 1: 96% Male 4% Female
   Study 2: 87.5% Male 12.5% Female

3. From the list of concerns below, RANK THE THREE major challenges confronting your district superintendent. (Place "1" by the first, "2" by the second, and "3" by the third.)

		"1"	"2"	"3"
_____ a) securing and retaining teachers	S1:	8	22	10
	S2:	17.5	12.5	17.5
_____ b) working closely with the community	S1:	2	9	26
	S2:	12.5	7.5	17.5
_____ c) securing adequate school monies	S1:	47	10	8
	S2:	37.5	12.5	5
_____ d) solving school morale problems for teachers or students	S1:	12	8	4
	S2:	5	15	7.5
_____ e) improving the school curriculum	S1:	4	24	22
	S2:	15	30	25
_____ f) consolidation of district with a neighboring district(s)	S1:	4	8	8
	S2:	5	10	2.5
_____ g) student achievement in the schools	S1:	14	10	14
	S2:	15	12.5	22.5
_____ h) other_____	S1:	4	8	2
	S2:	2.5	7.5	0

4. List two or three of the major <u>strengths</u>, characteristics, or abilities you feel are possessed by your present superintendent.

   Interpersonal relations/communications
   Financial/organizational management
   Good moral character/personality

5. List one or two of the major <u>weaknesses</u>, or concerns you might have regarding your present superintendent. (If you feel there are none, please write "none" in the space below.)

   Poor interpersonal relations

6. From your experience, what are the one or two major characteristics that distinguish an effective rural school superintendent from an ineffective one.

Ability to communicate and work cooperatively and effecively with others
Financial and organizational management
Interest and ability to live and work in a small community

On the scale below, please rate the extent to which you either agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

		Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
1. It is difficult for a small district to attract and retain a qualified superintendent.	S1:	10	18	37	24	10
	S2:	22.5	22.5	30	15	10
2. A superintendent assigned to a small, rural district faces challenges and problems which are different than a superintendnet assigned to a large urban or suburban district.	S1:	4	2	8	35	51
	S2:	0	2.5	2.5	37.5	57.5
3. The superintendent should be an instructional leader--that is highly involved in the work of teachers and achievement of students.	S1:	6	4	20	33	37
	S2:	0	15	7.5	27.5	50
4. The superintendent should be actively involved in community activities.	S1:	8	0	29	35	29
	S2:	0	10	20	45	25
5. The superintendent should be held personally accountable for his/her school district's academic performance.	S1:	8	17	38	31	6
	S2:	5	20	25	35	15
6. The superintendent should attend state and national education conferences in order to interact with colleagues and participate in professional organizations.	S1:	4	4	29	41	22
	S2:	0	2.5	22.5	45	30
7. The superintendent should be the leader in encouraging involvement and activity in the schools.	S1:	6	0	2	45	47
	S2:	0	5	10	20	65

If you were required to hire a new superintendent, please rate the importance that each of the following would play in your selection process.

		Not Important				Extremely Important
		1	2	3	4	5
1.	is married	S1: 29	4	29	33	6
		S2: 35	15	15	12.5	22.5
2.	is male	S1: 43	14	22	14	6
		S2:42.5	20	17.5	15	5
3.	was raised in a rural area	S1: 12	18	41	22	6
		S2:17.5	5	37.5	30	10
4.	is opposed to district consolodation	S1: 31	16	31	10	12
		S2:12.5	12.5	32.5	10	32.5
5.	understands the sociological implications of living in a small community (eg. isolation, distance from shopping, cultural events, etc.)	S1: 2	0	8	39	51
		S2: 0	0	15	27.5	57.5
6.	has extended family or relatives living in the area	S1: 50	23	23	4	0
		S2: 50	15	25	10	0
7.	is aware of current research practices, and innovations in education	S1: 4	0	8	45	43
		S2: 2.5	0	7.5	37.5	52.5
8.	has high moral and/or religious values	S1: 2	6	6	31	55
		S2: 0	2.5	5	30	62.5
9.	has desires to use technology as part of the instructional process for students in the school district (eg. computers, satellite instruction, videodisc, etc.)	S1: 6	2	8	51	33
		S2: 0	2.5	12.5	45	40
10.	is skilled in writing federal grants or contracts to obtain funds for school improvement	S1: 2	2	18	47	31
		S2: 5	0	17.5	40	37.5
11.	enjoys living in a small community	S1: 2	0	6	39	53
		S2: 0	0	7.5	37.5	55
12.	has a conservative political philosophy	S1: 16	14	33	27	10
		S2: 7.5	12.5	40	27.5	10